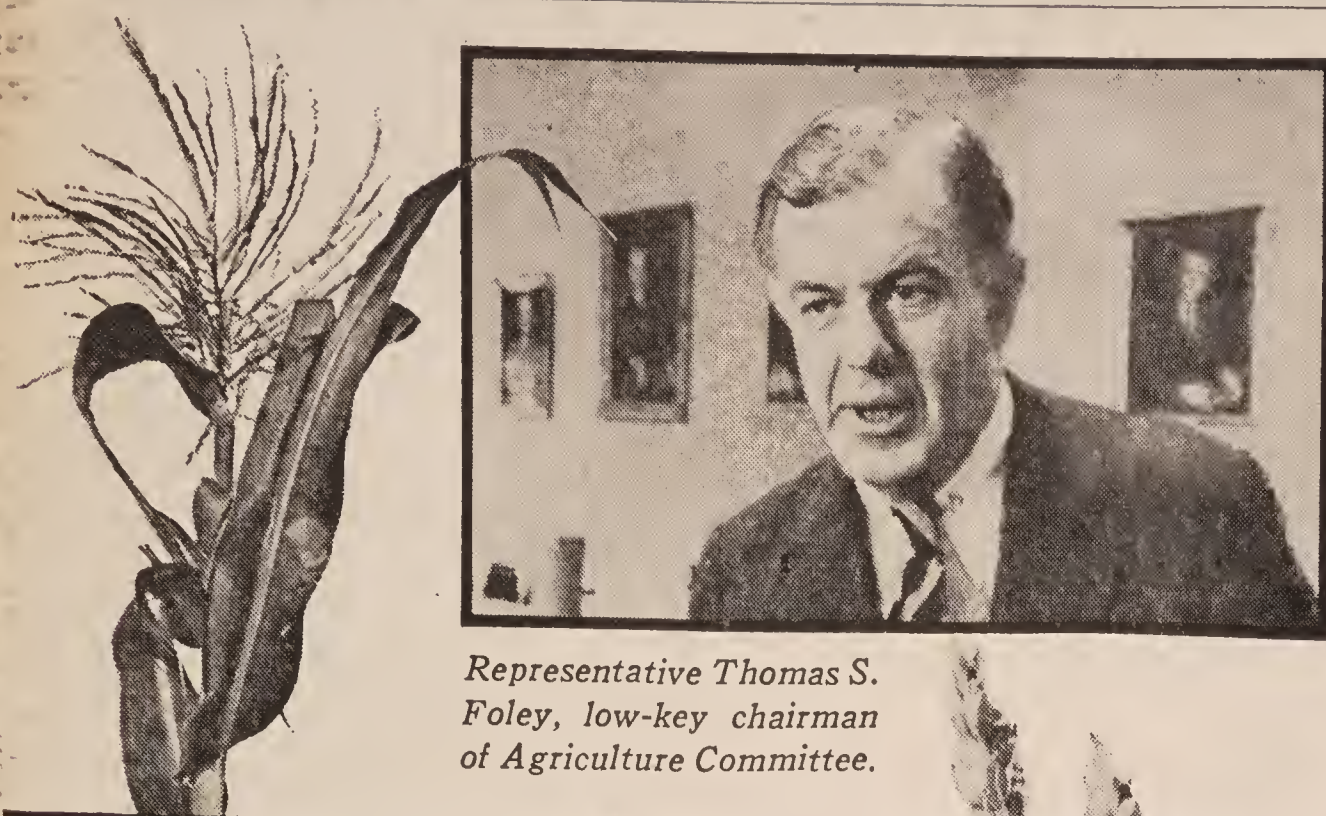


SPOTLIGHT



Representative Thomas S. Foley, low-key chairman of Agriculture Committee.

New Shepherd for Farm Legislation

By WILLIAM ROBBINS

WASHINGTON—Representative Thomas S. Foley, who is 6 feet 3 inches tall, stands higher than ever in the House these days despite leading a losing fight for a 1975 farm bill that both producers and consumers, whatever their alignment, saw as one of the major issues of the 94th Congress.

The measure passed the House originally by a wide majority, but after President Ford vetoed it, the effort to override fell short of the needed two-thirds majority. But that will not be the last round. A new fight is assured next year, an election year, when a veto might carry greater political risks in farm areas.

Mr. Foley, 46-year-old Democrat from Washington, had already emerged—quietly, as is his manner—as one of the most influential members of the House when the fight for the bill began, but few observers gave him any chance in the urban-oriented Congress to marshal enough votes to override a veto of a bill to increase price supports for farmers.

So after coming close—the vote on original passage was 259 to 162—Mr. Foley appears to have emerged with added stature rather than a figure of defeat. He had led in welding a strong coalition of farm, labor and urban interests. And in the next round supporters are putting their money on the leadership of the low-key but persuasive new chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. He was one of three younger men who were elected to head committees after the House Democratic caucus overthrew three long-time chairmen once thought to be invulnerable.

What the campaign for the bill also appears to have done was to call to wider public attention the significance of a committee that he had low visibility but that has had major importance for businessmen and consumers. Its business is food, which is a \$150-billion-a-year industry, and its jurisdiction includes food stamps, which have become a mainstay both for the unemployed and the underemployed and which will represent this year a tax cost of more than \$4-billion.

A measure of the way the committee is perceived by businessmen and others is the type of lobbyists who stand in line for a word with the chairman. They include representatives of both meat packers and cattle feeders, millers and wheat farmers, sugar refiners and cane producers, spinners and cotton growers, labor leaders and consumer spokesmen.

In the House, where urban representatives heavily outnumber rural legislators, the committee members had long done their work quietly, writing legislation that many of their colleagues failed even to fully understand, and the main features usually wound up in law, subject to compromise with the committee's counterpart in the Senate. In recent years, however, the consumer movement and increasing food prices have focused growing attention on farm policy, and now committee memberships are sought by urban leaders who once shunned what they regarded as a thankless, low-prestige job.

A measure of the importance Mr. Foley himself attaches to his job as head of the Agriculture Committee was his request, shortly after rising to the post, for a quinquennial budget to conduct both policy studies and the work of overseeing the actions of the agencies for which it is responsible.

"As I see it, Congress in the future has to do a better job of overseeing the work of the Government," Mr. Foley said in an interview. "This committee will have a vital part of that—important to consumers and businessmen, urban as well as rural people." The rest of the House apparently agrees. It gave him a year's budget of \$788,000, up from the \$150,000 on which the committee operated under the former chairman, W. R. Poage, the conservative Democrat of Texas, who on occasion returned funds unspent.

The fight for the farm bill was illustrative of both the Foley methods and the man's philosophy as well as the way Congress works in a new atmosphere created by the election of a strong contingent of young, aggressive members and a series of procedural reforms. "The problem was to frame a bill that could get broad support," Mr. Foley said. "I was never interested in 'issue' bills that only made fodder for fourth of July speeches."

What he sought also, he said, facing an administration that was "cool to the whole undertaking," was a bill that could get such broad support that President Ford could be persuaded not to veto it. "The urban concerns have to be recognized," he said, but if we're going to ask rural people to support urban interests, it's only fair to ask urban consumers to give farmers some protection when we call on them for all-out production."

Mr. Foley denies the validity of Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Buttz's suspicion that deals were made with labor and urban interests. ("When George Meany supports a farm bill I want to see the fine print," the Secretary said recently.) But he acknowledges he spent a good deal of time persuading labor and consumer representatives of the justice of the farmers' cause and arguing for indirect benefit to all through the bill's encouragement of maximum production.

One of the most difficult tasks was protecting the bill from its friends, fending off amendments that would increase farm benefits but lose Congressional support, and from enemies who would have raised those same benefits in order to defeat the measure.

The committee stood fast, writing a bill that would increase target prices and price-supports on loans for cotton and grains by about one-third and allow for the quarterly adjustment of price supports for milk products. Target prices are a trigger for subsidy payments when markets fall below the target level. Price-support loans can be drawn by farmers to enable them to withhold their products when market prices are weak.

Senate conferees, who had wanted higher targets and supports, yielded to the persuasion of Mr. Foley and his colleagues, conceding that anything more would have little chance of survival.

According to Lloyd Meeds, a fellow Washington Democrat, Mr. Foley's "great ability to take either side of an issue" is legendary. Members of the delegation recall the time when Representative Floyd V. Hicks, one of its members, asked Mr. Foley's opinion before voting on a bill. "Tom gave him a strong case for opposing the bill," Mr. Meeds recalled. "Then the members noted Mr. Foley walking in deep thought around the House floor till the vote was called, whereupon he cast his own support in favor of the bill. Mr. Hicks, rushing toward him, demanded a reason. 'I reconsidered,' Mr. Foley said."

Among the reasons Mr. Foley has such influence is the following: he has gained among young Congressmen whom he has helped and his own work in House reform. As a long-time member and last year's chairman of the Democratic Study Group, the influential liberal organization in the House, he was a leader in opening committee sessions to the public, and he has given a good deal of time to helping freshman Representatives get oriented.

Thus he was able to block a move to limit House committee chairmanships to six-year terms, a move that also cemented the friendship of older and more conservative members, by arguing that new democratic processes already provided a check against chairmen who abuse their powers.

The farm bill is only part of the work that Mr. Foley has mapped for his committee. Among the most pressing, he says, is a study of the increasingly complex and costly food stamp program. That study will be a "major undertaking," Mr. Foley said, citing a current lack of objective data on whom the food stamp program helps and how much.

Whatever comes out of the study, it is unlikely that he will accede to some Congressional and Administration pressures to shift food stamps to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and thus to another committee. Food-stamp provisions have been used in the past as leverage to get urban support for farm programs, but Mr. Foley gives other reasons. "I wouldn't be comfortable with a situation in which the Agriculture Committee was concerned only with farmers," he said.

Mr. Foley's strong support for food stamps is one of the few committee issues on which he disagreed materially with former Chairman Poage, although his election to replace the Texan was generally described as a move toward more liberal leadership.

Mr. Foley, in fact, is a hard man to pigeonhole. He has been described variously as liberal, moderate and conservative, depending on the issue. He recalls that "some critics back home say I talk right and vote left." In his own eyes, "On fiscal matters I am a concerned liberal—I'm troubled by people who want major new programs without facing the problem of financing them. On foreign policy I'm moderately conservative. On social programs I'm a liberal."

Whatever philosophical coloration ascribed to him, observers agree that, in his sixth term and the youngest major committee chairman in the House, Tom Foley is a Democrat with a future.

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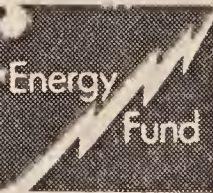
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